

Youth Anxiety, Stress, and Mental Health During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented many difficulties that have impacted people's socioemotional health and wellness. Scientists have been able to study the psychological impact on children and adolescents. They have found that youth experienced behavioral difficulties, such as inattention, clinging, worry, irritability, and anxiety-induced sleep problems. Social isolation is a **stressor** that is associated with higher levels of food intake, diet changes, and weight gain¹ during the pandemic. This may have affected children's self-image and mental health.



Young people also experienced changes in their moods and emotions during COVID-19. Specifically, adolescents and young adults experienced lower positive and higher negative **affect** or emotionality. Younger adolescents showed higher levels of energy, lower levels of tension and depression, and less mood fluctuations when compared to older adolescents and younger adults. This may mean that younger adolescents were more resilient at the beginning of the pandemic², and/or that the effects of the pandemic will show up later as this group gets older. It is well-known that adolescents' ability to adjust in difficult situations

depends on the support of their peers, family, school, and communities as opposed to individual factors. These social factors may also be why younger adolescents experienced more stability in their mood than older adolescents and young adults².

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people experienced emotions that are often present in emotional disorders, such as helplessness, hopelessness, loneliness, worry, and social isolation³. Quarantined people were more at risk of developing acute (short-term) and **post-traumatic stress symptoms and disorders** during the beginning of the isolation⁴. COVID-19 research on children and adolescents' trauma responses found that **emotional arousal** was a common response to COVID-19 stress.



Generally, increased emotional arousal was linked to conduct problems, negative affect, and attention difficulties in youth⁴. It is possible that COVID-19 stress may have caused people to be **hypervigilant**⁵. Higher COVID-19 related stress exposure led to an average increase of **anxiety, depression, and general discomfort** in children's and adolescents' lives⁴. Youth who were exposed to greater pandemic-related stressors exhibited higher rates of **internalizing** and **externalizing psychopathology** during stay-at-home orders and even six months later⁶. This connection, specifically for internalizing symptoms, was stronger among adolescents than children. The prevalence of psychological distress increased with age, with older youths reporting higher rates of depression and anxiety^{4,7}. This may be because of **biopsychosocial** changes happening during this time and increased exposure to adverse life events⁴.

Adolescence is a **sensitive period** for identity development, where many teenagers are yearning for independence from caregivers and peer influences have greater influence on social development and self-esteem. The pandemic's effect on youths' wellbeing and limited opportunities for **social buffering, autonomy, and enrichment** may make this group more vulnerable to mental health problems.



Understanding and supporting youth may be one way to address emerging and worsening mental health problems as they adjust to life during and after COVID-19⁵.

DEFINITIONS

Adjustment Processes - ways that individuals change attitudes and behaviors to address environmental needs and circumstances

Affect - underlying experience of feelings, emotions or moods

Anxiety - intense, excessive, and persistent worry and fear about everyday situations. Fast heart rate, rapid breathing, sweating, and feeling tired may occur

Biopsychosocial - interconnection between biology, psychology, and socio-environmental factors

Autonomy - ability to think, feel, make decisions, and act independently

Depression - mood disorder that causes a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest and can interfere with your daily functioning

Emotional Arousal - a state of heightened physiological activity

Enrichment - opportunities that promote growth and development

Externalizing psychopathology - psychological disorders with primary symptoms that involve outward behavior (e.g., attention, conduct, behavioral problems)

Hypervigilant/hypervigilance - state of abnormally heightened alertness, particularly to threatening or potentially dangerous stimuli

Internalizing psychopathology - psychological disorders with primary symptoms that involve internal emotions, as opposed to outward behavior (e.g., anxiety, depression)

Post-traumatic stress symptoms and disorders - having difficulty recovering after experiencing or witnessing a terrifying event. Symptoms generally include: intrusive memories, avoidance, negative changes in thinking and mood, and changes in physical and emotional reactions

Sensitive Period - a developmental window in which some skill or process is changing quickly in response to learning from the environment, and before and after which environmental experiences are less likely to have an impact

Stress/Stressor - an experience or event that triggers a physical response (higher heart rate, more sweating). May be internal or externally-driven

Social Buffering - the presence of social relationships reducing negative stress (psychological and physiological)

References

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